

Occasional Reflections 2

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On Being Musical

I have visited churches where musicians – organists, pianists, or other instrumentalists – play preludes with exquisite musical skill. The correct notes are there, phrases breathe, tempos are thought out well, musical lines are shaped with care, and pieces hang together coherently and beautifully. But then I am amazed that in the leadership of a hymn musical skills vanish. The right notes may not be there because sight reading has taken over, the introduction may bear little or no relation to the hymn, no concern has been given to musical cues for the congregation, there is no time to breathe, tempos lack thought, phrases are not shaped well, and the congregation longs for the end of the torture without knowing what the problem is. The problem is articulated when musicians say, “Oh, that’s just a hymn.”

You may have visited a church and witnessed what on occasion I have experienced. (This is rare, but I have encountered it on several occasions, the first when I was startled by it in high school.) A musician makes a complete botch of an introduction to a hymn and can barely play the hymn setting, but the congregation as a whole takes control by singing musically and with vigor. It’s as if they silently say, “OK, musician, you may do whatever you choose to do and go your merry way, but we choose to sing and to sing musically.” And they do.

This reminds me of how musical congregations can be. Instances of sustaining musicality when leaders disdain it are rare, however. I suspect they have been spawned by past musical leaders who helped congregations find their voice. When those musicians left, the congregations they served refused to give up their gift of song. The norm is that congregations are helped or hindered by musicians. How long they can go with botched musical leadership is a guess.

What does helpful musical leadership mean? It means beginning with the perspective that hymns and the other service music the congregation sings are to be treated musically, like

all music. There is no such thing as “just a hymn.” While the congregational genre is not art music, it is music nonetheless – folk music with all the normal musical components.

Congregations deserve musical leaders who practice, lead with right notes, breathe, spin out phrases that are shaped well, consider what tempos are appropriate, give musical cues for entries, and think about the texts and how music proclaims them. Congregational song requires of musicians as much time and effort as voluntaries require.

We who are church musicians betray the people we serve when we do not function musically. This is not a question of mistakes. Mistakes will happen no matter what. This is about serving God and our neighbors by working at the musical craft of our vocation for the people we serve. Yes, the congregation includes monotones and people who can't sing in rhythm. They're welcome to the party. Congregational song is not a choir performing on stage for an audience. It is the song of the body of Christ. As Charles Ives' father said when asked about John Bell, a stone mason who bellowed off-key, “Old John is a supreme musician. Look into his face and hear the music of the ages. Don't pay too much attention to the sounds. If you do, you may miss the music.”

But here's the thing. If we lead musically, we not only make it possible to sing together; the sounds and music of the monotone and everyone else also get better.